Company C, 194th Tank Bn in the Philippines, 1941-42

A California National Guard Tank Battalion, Federalized in 1941, Arrives In the South Pacific As War Breaks Out

by Burton Anderson

The author wishes to thank the following Company C Bataan survivors for their input into this article: CWO Ero Saccone, USA, Ret.; Frank I. Muther; Leon A. Elliott; Roy L. Diaz; Thomas J. Hicks, and Glenn D. Brokaw.

Company C was a California National Guard outfit that traced its roots to Troop C, 1st Squadron of the California Cavalry, organized in Salinas, California in 1895. After WWI, the Army converted one company in each of the 18 National Guard Divisions to a tank company, and in 1924, the Salinas Guard company became the 40th Tank Company in the 40th Infantry Division. The company was first equipped with French design Renault tanks left over from WWI.

The spectacular success of the German Panzer Divisions in the fall of France and Belgium caused the Army to form four tank battalions, from the 18 scattered National Guard tank companies, numbered 191, 192, 193, and 194. On September 8, 1940, the old 40th Tank Company became Company C, 194th Tank Battalion and was alerted for possible call-up. It didn't take the Army long to decide to induct various National Guard units into federal service, and on February 10, 1941, Company C was federalized and ordered to Fort Lewis, Washington, for training. At Fort Lewis, the Salinas company joined with Company A from Brainerd, Minnesota, and Company B, from St. Joseph, Missouri, to form the 194th Tank Battalion with Major E.B. Miller as commanding officer.

At Fort Lewis, it seemed that everything that could go wrong, did go wrong, from lack of uniforms to shortages of tanks and equipment. In addition, the Regular Army general at Fort Lewis viewed "latter day" soldiers with contempt, which made life even more difficult. In spite of all this, the 194th was rated among the best tank battalions in the Army and was shipped out from San Francisco on September 8, 1941, with 54 new Stuart M3 light tanks, bound for Manila. The unit had the distinction of being the first U.S. armored unit overseas in what was to become WWII.

Upon arrival in the Philippines, the shortage of supplies, especially gasoline and spare parts, hampered the battalion's training exercises, even though there were adequate supplies in the quartermaster warehouses in Manila. It was so bad that a request for spare parts often took 30 days to navigate the Army red tape. More critical was the fact that live ammunition wasn't issued until December 2, and the 37-mm tank guns had never been fired. The 37-mm HE ammo was never shipped to the Philippines; Ordnance finally improvised some HE ammo during the campaign.

On November 20, the 192nd Tank Battalion arrived in Manila and Company D, which was on board, was assigned to the 194th to replace Company B (from St. Joseph, Missouri) which had been detached at Fort Lewis and sent to Alaska. Colonel R.N. Weaver, a Regular Army officer, was placed in command of the Provisional Tank Group, consisting of the 192nd and 194th Tank Battalions, which was under the direct control of the U.S. Army Forces Far East (MacArthur), bypassing MG Wainwright, the ground

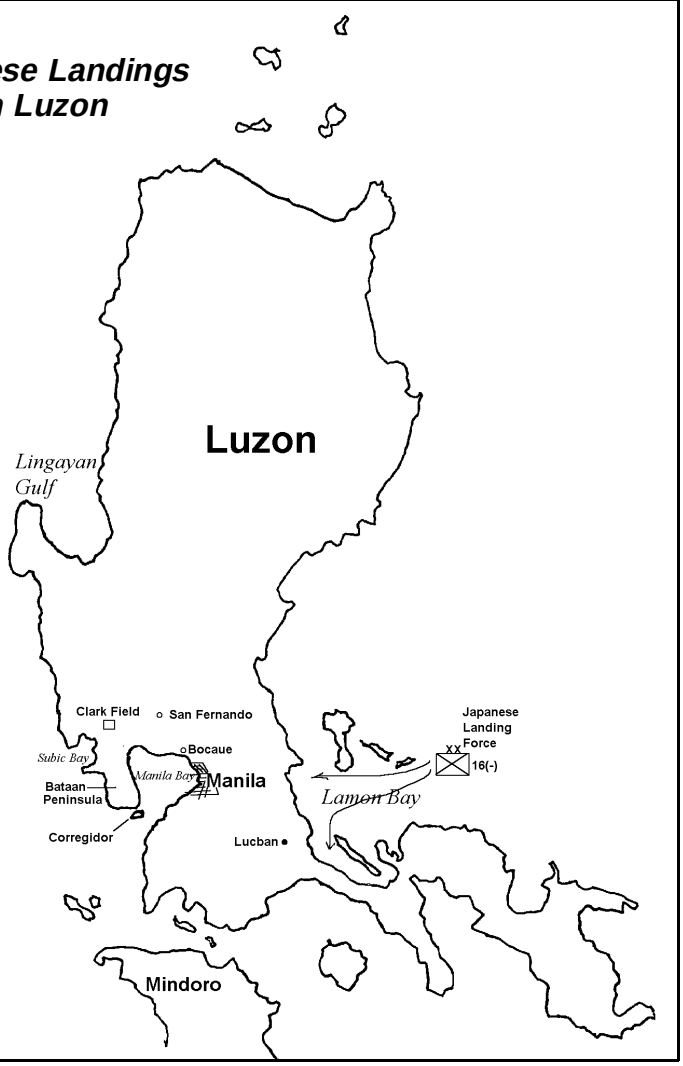
forces commander. This split command structure was to cause many problems in the defense of Luzon.

When the Japanese struck Clark Field December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor, Company C tankers were in defensive positions around the perimeter of the field. They had just finished lunch and were cleaning their mess kits when they saw an approaching formation of bombers and assumed they were U.S. bombers until the bombs started falling. The attacking force consisted of 53 bombers followed by 34 fighters. C Company soldiers ran to their tanks and half-tracks and commenced firing in spite of the bombs falling all around them. The enemy bombers smashed the neat rows of B-17s and P-40s lined up on the runway and then the fighters strafed everything that was left. At the end of the raid some 40 minutes later, half the U.S. Far Eastern Air Force was destroyed. In all, 55 men were killed and over 100 wounded, but miraculously, Company C suffered no casualties even though its soldiers were firing from exposed positions.

The fighters flew so low that it seemed a shotgun could bring one down. At that point, a "green" Regular Army lieutenant grabbed a private first class's arm and yelled that shooting at the planes would give away their position — as if it mattered at that point. The GIs blazed away with everything they had, and Private Earl G. Smith of Company C was credited with downing one of the nine enemy fighters shot down that day.

After the raid, the company spent the night loading machine gun belts from Springfield rifle clips because they had fired all their belted ammo. The next day, the company was split off from the battalion and bivouacked two miles northeast of Clark Field. It remained there until December 12, when it was detached from the 194th and ordered to join the South Luzon Force under the command of Brigadier General Albert M. Jones. They marched south at night, about 40 miles, and then made a daylight dash to Muntinlupa and on to Tagatay Ridge on the 14th. The company remained in this area from the 14th to the 24th and conducted reconnaissance patrols, hunting presumed fifth columnists who were flashing mirrors by day and setting off flares at night near our ammo dumps. No one was ever captured, but after C Company shot up some suspected native huts, the suspicious activities ceased.

The Japanese Landings in Southern Luzon



The Japanese landed 7,000 troops at Lamon Bay at 0200 on December 24 and proceeded inland in the direction of Lucban. Meanwhile, Company C moved into position on Christmas Eve to assist the Filipino 1st Infantry Regiment. During Christmas Day, Brigadier General Jones personally conducted a reconnaissance down a narrow road toward the enemy, escorted by a Company C halftrack manned by Sergeant Keith Lewis, Sergeant Leon Elliott, Private First Class Jim Hicks, Private William Hennessey, and Private Fred Yeager. They were reconnoitering north of Piis, Luzon, when they came under fire from an enemy advance guard. The halftrack, in attempting to turn around, fell into a ditch, but the crew was able to remove their guns and provide covering fire as they retreated, enabling General Jones and his driver to escape unharmed. For this action, General Jones recommended the crew for the Distinguished Service Cross, but no action was taken until April 1946, and then the recommendation was denied. Instead, the five crew members were awarded the Silver Star, but by then, only Sergeant Leon Elliott was still alive.

On December 26, the 2nd platoon was ordered by a Filipino major to move down a narrow mountain trail, firing as they went to impress the Filipino troops. The platoon leader, Lieutenant Needham, protested the order and suggested they do a reconnaissance first to see what was out in front, but the major assured him that the enemy only possessed small arms and ordered the platoon to carry out the mission. The tankers set out and promptly ran into an antitank gun and some concealed field pieces. The lead tank was hit, mortally wounding Lieutenant Needham and Private First Class Robert Bales. Staff Sergeant Emil S. Morello, in the second tank, drove around the disabled tank and ran over the antitank gun. Sergeant Morello's tank was also hit, wounding Private Eddie DiBenedetti, who was hit in the neck by a flying rivet. (This incident

prompted the War Department to change from riveted to welded construction in new tank production.) Another tank, commanded by Sergeant Glenn Brokaw, was hit and Privates First Class Jim Hicks, McLeod, and Seifort were killed and Brokaw seriously wounded. (Ironically, Hicks had volunteered to drive Brokaw's tank when the regular driver became ill.)

In all, five tanks were hit and immobilized. Sergeant Morello and four wounded stayed buttoned up inside their tanks, not daring to move because the Japanese had camped for the night alongside the tanks, unaware that anyone inside was alive. In the morning, the enemy left, and Sergeant Morello began tending the casualties. He gathered up five wounded, and they escaped through coconut groves and rice paddies.

With the help of Filipino guides they hired, Sergeant Morello and the wounded soldiers all showed up in Manila five days later after fleeing through enemy territory. He left DiBenedetti in a Catholic Hospital in Manila and, with the other wounded, made his way by Banca to Corregidor. Later, during February, Sergeant Morello was able to rejoin the company on Bataan. For this action, Sergeant Morello was awarded the Silver Star.

The action described above resulted in the loss of an entire platoon of tanks and five soldiers, and was a grim lesson about the consequences when reconnaissance is ignored and tanks are sent out on a mission, essentially blind.

Manila was declared an open city on December 24, and, on the 25th, General MacArthur ordered the implementation of Orange Plan-3, which provided for the withdrawal of all Philippine and U.S. forces into Bataan as a last defensive position. In compliance with the order, Company C withdrew from South Luzon on December 29, acting as a rear guard for General Jones's troops. They moved to Tagatay Ridge on the 31st and made a sleepless 100-mile night dash to Bocaue where they rejoined the rest of the 194th Tank Battalion.

On the march North, the troops were to bypass Manila because it had been declared an open city; however, the rear guard, led by First Sergeant Ero "Ben" Saccone, was unsure of the route around the city. They decided to go through central Manila (the only maps they had were Atlantic Richfield service station maps) and it didn't seem to matter that the city was off limits.

In the dark, one of Company C's tanks hit the Jose Rizall statue while trying to avoid hordes of fleeing civilians. The tank threw a track on impact and bent an idler. The crew worked all night trying to repair it, but by daylight, they saw it was hopeless. They disabled the tank and tried to hitch a ride with some Filipino troops in Bren Gun carriers. None would stop until the tankers leveled their .45 cal Thompson submachine guns at the convoy. Then they got a lift; they were the last armored troops out of Manila.

From Bocaue, the company headed for the Calumpit Bridge over the Pampanga River on Route 3. This was a vital structure, since all traffic fleeing Manila toward Bataan had to pass over this bridge. It was here that C Company witnessed 100-150 empty Filipino trucks in headlong flight from Manila, where there were ample supplies in the warehouses. Had these supplies been moved while there was still time, the U.S. and Filipino forces on Bataan could have conceivably held out longer and with far less suffering. Also, had these supplies been moved prior to the outbreak of hostilities, as called for in Orange Plan-3, the troops wouldn't have nearly starved to death. Perhaps the inaction was due to General MacArthur's belief that war would not break out until April 1942.

All the South Luzon forces were across the Calumpit Bridge by 0230 January 1, followed by C Company in the rear guard. Then the bridge was blown up. From there, the tanks moved through San Fernando at the critical junction of Route 3 and Route 7 from North Luzon. Again, the tankers formed successive road blocks on Route 7 during the next three days.

At 1600 on January 5, Captain Fred Moffitt, commanding officer, C Company, leading two tanks and two halftracks, assisted by four self-propelled 75-mm guns and the 31st Infantry, ambushed 750-800 enemy troops. Our forces inflicted 50 percent casualties on the Japanese and left the town of Lubao in flames. Had they not stopped the enemy troops there, our retreat into Bataan would have been cut off.

Moving toward Bataan on January 6, another night battle took place near Remulus. Captain Moffitt's halftrack took a direct hit from an enemy shell that took off Private William Hennessey's left foot and wounded Private First Class Walter Martella. Both died of their wounds, Martella within a few days due to gas gangrene, and Hennessey at Camp O'Donnell after the surrender on Bataan. In the same battle, Staff Sergeant Carl F. Abbott scored a direct hit on an enemy tank before his tank was hit and disabled; however, he escaped injury and the tank was retrieved the next day.

The withdrawal toward Bataan continued, and by January 7th, Company C was at the Culo River, guarding the left flank of the Layac Bridge, which was the gateway to Bataan. As soon as all forces were across, the tankers withdrew and the bridge was blown up, temporarily sealing off the Bataan Peninsula. The blowing of bridges had become of critical importance, and the commanding officer of the 194th had to give his personal order before a bridge could be demolished. This order came about because of the loss of six tanks by the 192nd at the Agno River in Northern Luzon, when panicky Filipino troops blew a bridge and stranded the tanks on the enemy side.

The withdrawal into Bataan to a bivouac south of the Abucay Main Battle Line afforded the troops a slight lull from battle. They had been in action for 30 consecutive days and were exhausted. To add to their misery, MG Wainwright ordered the food ration cut in half, to only 30 ounces per man per day. In the first month of combat, Company C had lost seven tanks and six men killed in action. The losses necessitated reorganizing the company into three platoons of three tanks each, plus one command tank (prewar strength was five tanks to a platoon plus the CO and XO tanks, for a total of seventeen). The remaining tanks were long past the 400-hour scheduled maintenance and had been run so hard the rubber track plates had been worn down to the metal. Fortunately, some replacement parts were available from the Service Command Area in southern Bataan.

The next significant action involving a platoon of C Company was after General Wainwright sent three tanks to Bagac, on the west coast of Bataan. The following day, they were ordered to advance north to reopen the coastal highway to Moron. The tanks were moving in advance of the main body and as they rounded a curve, the lead tank (Staff Sergeant Frank Muther) was fired on at point-blank range by an antitank gun. Incredibly, the round went right over the turret, and in returning fire, the tank knocked out the enemy gun. Two tanks following 600 yards back hit land mines placed by the Japa-

nese after the lead tank went by. This use of land mines was a favorite tactic of the Japanese. Muther's tank was able to turn around and withdraw past the disabled tanks, and the platoon got out without any personnel casualties. The disabled tanks were towed out the next day and used for spare parts.

This incident was another case where an order to send tanks out alone, ahead of infantry, nearly became a suicide mission. Throughout the campaign, tanks were not used properly. The generals regarded them as mobile pill boxes. They also tended to send only a platoon when a full company was needed. Conflicting orders from the Provisional Tank Group Commander (Colonel Weaver) and General Wainwright kept the tank battalion commanders in constant turmoil, and often they had to rely on their own judgment. The tanks were often assigned piecemeal to various units by Tank Group or by Wainwright's ground commanders, thereby losing the advantage of combined arms protection. In addition, few senior officers had any experience with tanks, and they did not know how to employ armor to the best advantage.

By the middle of January, lack of food and medicine caused malaria, dengue (dengue fever), and dysentery, which took a heavy toll on the malnourished troops. Especially critical was a shortage of quinine to treat a virulent form of malaria prevalent on the Bataan Peninsula. The constant hordes of flies and mosquitoes made their problems worse. The troops had not received any mail since the war started. Occasionally, they could get some news via short-wave radio from San Francisco, but otherwise listened to Tokyo Rose for entertainment.

On January 26th, C/194 covered the withdrawal from the Abucay Main Battle Line toward the next defensive position at the Pilar-Bagac Road. (The only satisfactory road across Bataan.) As Company C was moving across an area called Hacienda Flats, the U.S. forces inflicted at least 1,500 casualties. The Japanese retaliated with a heavy bombing attack. A dud bomb went though the fender of Muther's tank but didn't explode. Another tank stalled on a bridge and had to be pushed over the side to prevent a roadblock. Captain Moffitt was wounded in the leg by a flying timber while crossing a bridge just as it was blown up.

By February 8, the U.S. and Philippine forces had fought the enemy to a standstill in spite of their supply, disease, and malnutrition problems. There was a lull in infantry action, but the Japanese kept up the relentless shelling and bombing of our lines. Company C was on the east coast of Bataan and used mainly for beach defense, to ward off any attempt by the enemy to invade Bataan from Manila Bay. During an aerial attack near Lamao, a .50 cal machine gunner from C Company hit a Japanese plane that was last seen smoking and diving toward Manila Bay, a fact confirmed by Sergeant Lewis. The company was split up into various beach positions, and some of the locations were near enough to Japanese lines that 14-inch mortar fire from U.S. guns on Corregidor landed uncomfortably close to our tanks.

By the middle of March, the food ration was cut again, down to 15 ounces per man per day. The troops subsisted mainly on rice, supplemented by anything they could scrounge, including worms, snakes, monkeys, and an occasional native caribou. General Wainwright, an old cavalry man, had to order the slaughter of 250 horses and 42 mules from his beloved 26th Cavalry Regiment to ward off starvation. In spite of the extra meat, the Bataan forces were in dire straits, with one fourth of the troops in the hospital with disabilities associated with disease and malnutrition.

Toward the end of March, the Japanese resumed their offensive after being reinforced by Imperial Marines released after the fall of Singapore. On April 3, the enemy began an all-out offensive, accompanied by constant bombing and shelling. Major General Edward P. King (in command after Wainwright moved to Corregidor) made one last effort to stop the enemy across Southern Bataan.

Four tanks from the 2nd platoon were sent from Lamao, on April 6, over mountain trails to the vicinity of Mount Samat in south central Bataan. The tanks were to support the Philippine 45th and 57th Infantry, Philippine Scouts, who were opposing the enemy coming down Trail 29. On the morning of April 7, the Filipinos were in headlong flight, and the tanks moved down Trail 8 to try and stem the tide. At the junction of Trail 6, the lead tank encountered antitank fire, which blasted it off the trail, knocking out the tank commander. Corporal Ray Peoples took over command, and with the other tanks covered the withdrawal under intense enemy fire. The retreat was made more difficult by the hundreds of troops and vehicles clogging the trail. The platoon managed to regain its starting point without further casualties. However, Sergeant Morello's tank, which suffered an engine lockup, had to be towed to the shop at Cabcaben.

Meanwhile, the 3rd platoon, under the command of First Sergeant "Ben" Saccone, with two tanks and two halftracks, was ordered to attempt an enveloping maneuver by moving to the west coast of Bataan via the coast road to Mariveles and on to the Pilar-Bagac Road. They were in the vicinity of Mount Samat where they encountered fierce resistance at an enemy road block. (It was virtually impossible for the tanks to get off the trails because of the thick jungle and trees. This was a constant problem during the entire campaign. The platoon was out of radio contact with battalion headquarters and was unable to assess the situation, so it reversed its march and made it back to Mariveles, where it rejoined the remnants of the company. These two actions were the last for Company C, which by April 8 had been in combat for four months, lost ten tanks, and had six men killed in action.

General King, on April 8, acknowledged that the situation was critical and that further resistance would result in the massacre of his troops, including 6,000 sick and wounded and 40,000 refugees. The troops still on the line were less than 25 percent effective and couldn't last for more than a day. Consequently, he ordered the troops to cease fire and to destroy their equipment when the code word "Blast" was given. This occurred at 0700 April 9, 1942, and hostilities on Bataan ceased. As it turned out, the U.S. and Philippine troops were doomed from the start of the war by the lack of air power, supplies, and reinforcements. However, due to the heroic efforts of units like C/194th Tank Battalion, the Japanese advance was critically slowed.

General Homma had expected to take the Philippines in three months, but instead it took five, and the U.S. gained precious time needed to go on the offensive in the Pacific.

Company C, 194th Tank Battalion was officially inactivated April 2, 1946, in the Philippines, and the chapter closed on a courageous outfit. The combat and prisoner of war ordeal had taken a heavy toll on the company and out of 105 men who left Salinas, February 18, 1941, only 47 returned. During the time the company was in combat, it earned three Presidential Unit Citations (Defense of the Philippines,

Luzon, and Bataan) and the Philippine Presidential Unit Citation for service from December 7, 1941 to May 10, 1942. In Company C, there were six Silver Stars awarded to tankers, and the entire company received the Bronze Star. Unfortunately, this didn't happen until well after the war, and by then, many medals were given posthumously. It took tireless effort by men such as Chief Warrant Officer Ero "Ben" Saccone to enable these men to receive their well-merited medals.

In 1947, Salinas again had a tank company when the Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 149th Armor was activated. Since that time, the company has been assigned to various units. At present, it is Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 149th Armor. Its unofficial motto is "Remember the Road to Bataan," a lasting tribute to the men of Company C, 194th Tank Battalion.

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Burton Anderson served as an ensign aboard the heavy cruiser *USS Pensacola* during WWII and during the Bikini atom bomb tests in 1946. He graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1949 and joined a firm in the lettuce business. He retired in 1985 after spending 36 years with the company, rising from ranch manager to executive. Currently, he is an independent agricultural consultant and is staff historian for the *Coastal Grower* magazine. He has written numerous articles on agriculture and Salinas Valley history.